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THE BIRDS OF LANCASHIRE

The Birds of Lancashire. By F. S. Mitchell, M.B.O.U.
Illustrated by J. G. Keulemans, Victor Prout, &c.
Pp. xviii. 224. (London: Van Voorst, 1885.)

IMPORTANT as are the services which the writers of county faunas have rendered to the study of British ornithology every one knows, or ought to know, that such works have a very variable value. In some cases the geographical position of the county concerned is such as to invest its avifauna with high interest quite apart from the manner of its treatment, which may be, and in a few instances that we could but will not name, has been of a slovenly character. Or again, local considerations may be comparatively insignificant, and yet the book, from the combined knowledge and skill of the author, will be a great and positive gain to zoological literature. Thus it follows that the most pretentious works not unfrequently fall short of even a moderate standard of excellence, while that is attained or even surpassed by others put forward with unassuming modesty. It gives us great pleasure to express our opinion that the little book now before us, "The Birds of Lancashire," falls well within the latter category. Its author, Mr. Frederick Shaw Mitchell, is known to have been engaged in its preparation for several years, and that he has used those years of preparation to good purpose almost every page in the book testifies. We have especially to commend his introductory remarks, which prove that he has taken the proper and philosophical view of the duties of a faunistic monographer, while the rest of the book shows how efficiently he has discharged them according to that view.

In these days the county of Lancaster, or at least its southern half, with its swarming population, its tall chimneys expelling tons upon tons of soot, and, still worse, volumes of noxious vapours, its once limpid streams drunk up by countless manufactories and returned to their channels befouled with deleterious compounds, presents almost as poor a field for the outdoor naturalist as can well be found in the United Kingdom. Nor does its geographical situation offer the ornithologist much promise for the pursuit of his study. Its coast-line, though extensive as that of English counties goes, is formed by the recess of a land-locked sea; and notwithstanding that as yet we really know little of the routes taken by birds in their migrations, there is nothing to induce the belief that any much-frequented route will be found to skirt Morecambe Bay, the sand-hills of Blackpool, or the estuaries of the Ribble and the Mersey. Nor do the hills of its interior, though rising to the height of nearly 2000 feet, and even exceeding that in the northern detached district of Furness, which contains the much admired Conistown Water and Windermere, add greatly to the attractiveness of a county which has the disadvantage of lying on the wrong side of our island—for we take it to be undeniable that in England birds, both as individuals and as species, decrease in number as we pass from the eastern to the western coast.

"The vast increase of population, and the scientific
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farming which drains every marsh, substitutes for every bosky nook a rigid bank and paling mathematically drawn, are the chief causes of the decrease both in species and individuals which has taken place in the manufacturing districts; but it is astonishing how many still flourish among the teeming millions which dwell there, and should it be possible for air and water to become more pure, there is no doubt that, except in the immediate vicinity of buildings, little further diminution would occur.

"The way in which birds are driven away by the extension of buildings, and by the conversion of a rural into an urban locality, may well be instanced by the case of Peel Park, Salford, which is one in point. Mr. John Plant has kindly permitted me to use his notes, which have been carefully kept since 1850, and which show the following results:—

	Personally observed.	Breeding.
1850-60	71 species	34 species
1860-70	42 "	— "
1870-75	19 "	8 "
1876-80	15 "	— "
1881	13 "	— "
1882	5 "	2 ¹ "

Mr. Plant considers that the main causes are not so much simply the presence of more people and greater disturbance by them, as the destruction of natural food, and loss of protective foliage, from the vitiated atmosphere, and makes the melancholy prophecy that, if the same thing goes on for another ten years, there will not be a large tree alive in the park."—*Introductory*, p. iii.

Yet Mr. Mitchell does not think that on the whole birds in Lancashire are decreasing, and remarks that "the greater scarcity of the Goldfinch, for instance, which feeds on the thistles of waste lands, is balanced by the greater plentifulness of the Hawfinch, which prefers a more cultivated country." The extensive range and increasing numbers of the species last mentioned of late years throughout the whole of England is indeed a matter that is at present quite unaccountable. But Mr. Mitchell goes on to say that "if the game-preserver will lay aside some of his truculence in respect of species which occasionally diminish his stock, if the denizens of towns will discourage the bird-catching fraternity, and be content to only hear the Linnet and the Bullfinch in their natural haunts, and if the specimen hunter will try to be content with skins which are not *local*, there is no reason to expect any approach to extinction of species which are now on the list." Here we would remark that not much harm comes from bird-catching if the law now existing be obeyed, and that without it few "denizens of towns" would ever hear the song of any bird; but we quite agree with what our author says as to the game-preserver and skin-collector. From the results of somewhat extensive observation in many parts of England it is clear that the absolute extermination of both Kestrel and Sparrow-Hawk—the last of the birds-of-prey which can be said to inhabit this country generally—will be accomplished in a very few years, and even our three species of Owl—in spite of the Act which nominally protects them—are likely to suffer the same fate. Mr. Mitchell no doubt recognises the fact, as every impartial observer must do, that, birds-of-prey excepted, the system of strict game-preserving affords an incalculable amount of protection to all other birds; but the "local specimen-hunter" is usually a pestilent character indeed—one who without any counterbalancing merit simply flatters his own vanity, degrades an interesting not

¹ Starling and House Sparrow.

to say instructive study, and induces his fellow-subjects to break the law by the price he offers for his "rarities."

Passing to another part of our theme we wish to mention our author's remarks on the valueless nature of nearly all the ordinary records with regard to the migrations of birds. Many we are sure must have felt the truth of the following statements; but we do not recollect having before seen it so explicitly put forth, and congratulate Mr. Mitchell on perceiving its importance. He says:—

"The fact is, that very few of the observations, now so numerously made, as to the movements of summer migrants, are worth anything at all; and if data are to be collected on land of value commensurate with those now being collected on information from lighthouses, &c., by the committee appointed by the British Association, it will be necessary for the observer to fulfil something like the following conditions: firstly, that he should be continuously engaged out of doors; secondly, that he should be entirely familiar, not only with the plumage of the birds, but that he should be able to recognise most of them when flying, and be thoroughly acquainted with their song, their call and alarm notes; and thirdly, that he should have a knowledge of the food requirements of each species, and be able, for instance, to infer, from the plentifulness of such and such an insect, that such and such a bird may be expected to feed on it. Such a conjunction can only be found in few individuals; but if every man in his leisure field-walks would, and especially in connection with meteorological conditions, note the other natural circumstances at the time of his first seeing a spring arrival, a mass of information would be got together, invaluable for the discovery of the laws of geographical distribution; and until something of the sort is done, and such information sifted and compared, I believe those laws will remain, as they are now, dubious and conjectural."—*Introductory*, pp. ix. x.

In the bibliographical portion of his work Mr. Mitchell shows himself to be well read, and the selections he makes from the writings of his predecessors seem to be exceedingly judicious. If he errs at all, which we do not say is the case, it is on the side of conciseness, and we can imagine that many readers who have not access to a good library would be better pleased had his extracts occasionally been longer, so that, should his little book reach a second edition, as it well deserves to do, this point might be borne in mind by the author; though we cannot find it in ourselves to blame him on this account, knowing the tendency to superfluity which prevails among the ornithological writers of the present day. One unquestionable merit Mr. Mitchell possesses. He is free from the wish to exaggerate the importance of his subject, and is certainly not bent on making out a numerous list of the birds of his county, as so many compilers of local faunas have done, by giving fresh life to the most doubtful reports which profess to record impossibilities. In one case, indeed, he seems to us to have transgressed; but he may be pardoned for not being aware of the profound mistrust that was entertained nearly five-and-twenty years since by well-informed persons in regard to some statements that were then made in a certain auction-catalogue. The Swallow-tailed Kite should disappear from his list. Lancashire, however, indubitably boasts the possession of the only existing "British-killed" specimens of the Black-throated Wheatear and the Wall-Creeper—though an example of the latter is known to have been obtained in

Norfolk nearly one hundred years ago—and accordingly a coloured figure (by Mr. Keulemans) of each of these species is introduced. Some carefully drawn illustrations of decoys, as well as several other ingenious modes of netting or snaring wild birds, are also given, and these add not a little to the interest of the book; for, with the exception of the plates in Rowley's not very accessible "Ornithological Miscellany," we are not aware of any representation of the mode of capture by "fly-nets," while we think neither the "douker-net" nor the "snipe-pantle" has ever been figured before; and with respect to this last term, which Mr. Mitchell derives "from the Anglo-Norman 'panter = a net or snare,'" we may observe that Olinia in 1622, and Willughby after him, calls a certain kind of net used in taking starlings, woodcocks, and other birds *pantiera*—a word which seems to exist now in Italian as *pantera*.¹ Of course a work on the birds of Lancashire could not be complete without a reference to Gerarde and the Pile of Foulders, whereon bernacles turned to geese; but we are glad to see that Mr. Mitchell abstains from sneering at the old herbalist's credulity, as so many modern writers have done, though we must point out to him that in these days to speak of a bernacle as "a species of multivalve" is to use a somewhat vague if not inaccurate expression. Let us add that a map of the county and, so far as we have tested it, an excellent index are among the merits of this satisfactory little book.

A CATALOGUE OF CANADIAN PLANTS

Geological and Natural History Survey of Canada.

Alfred R. C. Selwyn, LL.D., F.R.S., F.G.S., Director.

"Catalogue of Canadian Plants. Part II. Gamopetalæ."

By John Macoun, M.A., F.L.S., F.R.S.C. 8vo, 200 pp. (Montreal: Dawson Brothers, 1884.)

ALTHOUGH this is only a catalogue of names and localities, it is a work of much interest and one that has been greatly needed by European botanists and botanical geographers. The flora of the north temperate zone in both hemispheres is so very similar in general character that nearly half of the genera of the Canadian area and a large number of the species reach to it all the way from Britain across Europe and through Siberia, and the remarkable longitudinal differentiation of the flora of the United States renders it a matter of much interest to be able to trace out the dispersion of the species through the more northern areas of the Continent. The "Flora Boreali-Americana" of Sir Wm. Hooker is now forty years old, and all that has since been worked out about the Canadian species and their distribution has never been put together and published so that it was available for general use. The first portion of the present Catalogue, which was issued in 1883, contained the Polypetalous natural orders; including naturalisations the number of Polypetalous genera was 243, and of species 907. The present part contains the Gamopetalæ, and carries up the number of genera to 498, and of species to 1811. So that the total number of flowering plants now known in British North America may be estimated at about 3000 species against 10,000 or 12,000 now known in the United States. One of the most remarkable points

¹ See also Prof. Skeat's "Etymological Dictionary" (p. 415) *sub voce* "Painter," for instances of its use by Chaucer and others.